

My Tübingen Exchange

By Freya Sawbridge



Preparations for the stay abroad

This was my second exchange, so I felt less need to be organised as I had been through the exchange process before. I am also a British Citizen, so not requiring a visa gave me immense flexibility. The only preparation I did was book flights and get health insurance.

Studying in your host country

I was blown away on my first arrival in Tübingen. It was 25 degrees blue bird day. I realised quickly it would be one of the most beautiful, quaint, and architecturally interesting cities I ever get the pleasure of living in.

I was immensely impressed by the welcome activities provided by the University of Tübingen. The three day induction course was so helpful. I had originally not intended to take part in it but am so relieved I did. I am still in contact with the German leaders who led my group during activities and made all my close friends during those three days.

German efficiency is a bit of a myth! And if you go to Tübingen University, you will quickly realise this. The registration process was very slow. You basically have to email all lecturers personally to register for a class and this is a slow process but it all worked out in the end. Moreover, very often a lecturer's email

would not work – so be aware of these problems!

Another terribly flawed system was the lack of availability for registration of popular classes at the university, such as “German Beginners” class. Only about 15% of interested students are successful in getting a spot for these popular classes, and apparently happens every year so I don’t know why it is not sorted by now.

The academic system is vastly different to New Zealand. I really do not enjoy the “presentation” element here whereby the first half of each class is run by students who make a presentation on a designated topic. I would rather be taught by the knowledgeable lecturer than fellow students.

I do find classes a lot easier here, but given I am a native English speaker in a non native English speaking country this is understandable.

On this note, I would say, pick your classes wisely! While it is a university exchange and the papers you take should be of interest to you, look at the experience more holistically. The travel, friendships, cultural insight, parties, and fun are all much more important than the grades you get. So if you can pick “easier” classes, then I 100% recommend you do that!

Something I loved about exchange was how all the students rat-a-tat-tatted on the tables at the end of each lecture to thank the lecturer. In New Zealand we have no signal as a thank you, we just get up and leave class. It’s little nuances such as this why I love exchange.

Staying in your Host Country

1. Accommodation

I decided to couchsurf for the first half of my exchange. Couchsurfing is an online website which allows you to connect with and stay with locals from all over the world. I had posted a request to stay with locals in Tübingen about a month before departing and was overwhelmed by the responses. The first boy I stayed with was a lovely student called Benjamin. Within 30 minutes of arriving to Tübingen from Stuttgart, he told me I could go meet him in his place as he had skipped his lecture. I anxiously typed his address into Google Maps, preparing myself for the 25min walk it would prescribe, but to my delight it was 300m away, right in the centre of the Altstadt (centre) and 30m from Tübingen Schloss (castle). I had arranged to stay here for five days.

I actually have a blog and wrote a piece about my couchsurfing experience with Benjamin so thought it would be interesting to share it here:

A Couch as My Home

Essay one: I am not naïve or brave; I am privileged

I stooped through the wooden doorway into the concrete hallway and reached into my pocket to draw my phone out for light. I had my satchel stuffed with vegetables for the curry I would make for dinner and all my papers for university hugged to my chest. I climbed up the stairs, pushed my weight against the door and when it opened I headed to the kitchen where Ben was perched at the dining table. I placed my bag and papers down and flicked the kettle on. I had just arrived back from attempting to get matriculated by Tübingen University but had some troubles. The Tübingen Registrar told me that because I didn't have a formal contract and was not paying rent for a house, I was essentially living in Tübingen illegally. I had been warned of German Bureacracy before but only now did I realise the extent of it. The first lady I spoke to told me I wouldn't be allowed to attend university because I didn't have a rental contract. I sat there aghast. She made a phone call and after hanging up the phone told me "du bist ein glückliches Mädchen" (You are a lucky girl). She told me the refugee crisis changed the university requirement for all students to have an official place of residence as it simply became too impractical.

Benjamin sympathised and we got discussing the refugee crisis in Germany and whether he thinks it was good Germany took in over 1 million refugees. He told me he had a friend called Mohammed from Afghanistan, a quiet and gentle boy who was a mechanic. Mohammed fled to Germany four years ago after his mother sold all their possessions to pay for his boat ride across to Italy. When in Italy, his boat driver told him to catch the train and stay on it for as long as he possibly could. The first time the train officers checked his ticket was in Germany, where they discovered he was a illegal immigrant. He was sent to a refugee camp before being placed in Tübingen. He could not contact his family for the proceeding four years. After eventually managing to get hold of his mother, he learned one of his sisters had died. In late 2016, Germany declared Afghanistan a "safe" country, and Mohammed will be deported in one year.

To say I can understand Mohammed's situation is wholeheartedly untrue. I sometimes wonder whether I couchsurf because it ignites my curiosity or because it feeds my ego. The hearing about a boy living in the flat across from me trying to bring his loved ones to Germany but facing the reality of returning the country he so desperately fled was as if the world flicked my ghastly ego from my pert shoulders.

Some people think I am naïve when I couchsurf in another country alone, others think I am brave. Neither is true.

I am privileged.

I am privileged because I can travel to another country as I have money and a passport which enables me to do so.

I am privileged because I never think about how racism will effect me because I have white skin.

I am privileged because I never fear being sent back to a war-stricken country simply because of where I was born.

I am privileged because I get to couchsurf as I have access to technology that allows me to connect with amazing people all over the world.

I am privileged because I know that if something does go wrong I can call my parents, both whom are still alive and they are able to give me money to stay in accomodation.

When people think I am naïve, they don't understand couchsurfing. When people think I am brave, they don't understand privilege.

I spent a week with Benjamin at his place and then I moved in with a family up on the Tübingen hills in the Wanne area. This was a totally different but an equally valuable experience. I was totally accepted into their family and they made me feel so welcome by buying me German language books and allowing me to walk their dog. They lived right near a farm so most of my days I would listen to German podcasts in attempt to learn the language (which I absolutely love!) and walk in the green pastures and through the neighbouring forest.

After 2 month couchsurfing, I was lucky enough to secure a place in Prinz Karls, as another exchange student was leaving early, so I took her room. This was bang in the centre of the city, and couldn't be more perfectly situated. I would host drinks, dinner parties and card nights at this accommodation and loved having my own space to do this.

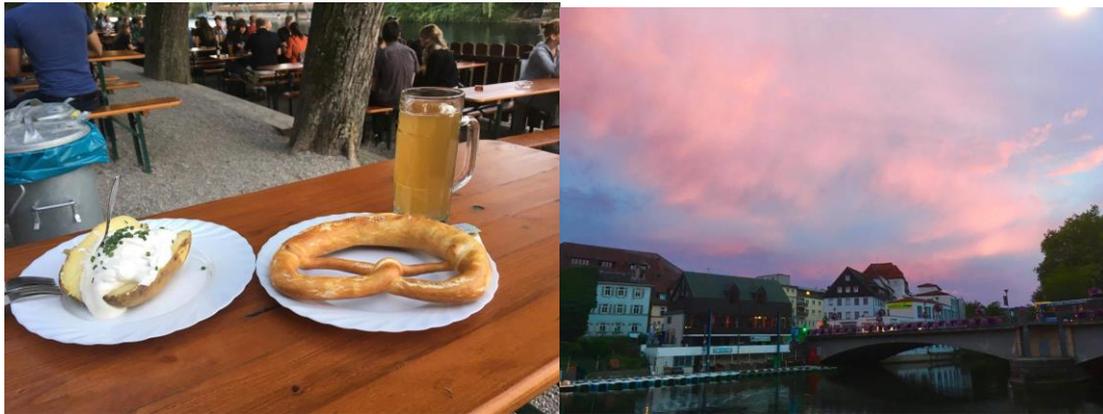
2. Food and drink

Food food food! This aspect has to be one of the highlights of Tübingen and Germany in general. Being able to eat out cheaply is such a luxury. Due to the expense of New Zealand, "wining and dining" has never been able to be daily occurrence. In Tübingen I ate out all the time and would often spend entire afternoons and evenings hanging with friends at cafes, restaurants and bars, because it is so affordable.

I love the simplicity of food here. Very often I would go out to one of my favourite cafes (Café Im Hirsch) and order the 5 euro baguette stuffed with lettuce tomato and feta or I would pop to Bären with friends and share an 8 euro cheese platter or get a falafel doner on the run while walking to university. In New Zealand food is always so fancy. A baguette would be wood fired, and served with avocado mouse and whipped feta, and a micro green salad.. and because of the "fancy" wording they would add an extra 10 dollars on. I love that the descriptions here match the meal. There is no layered fanciness, it's just simple and honest food.

My fav places to eat:

1. Kalender: no1! You HAVE to eat margarita pizza here or a lamacun or doner kebab. They are the friendliest staff and deliver amazing fresh food
2. Die Kicher Erbsen: Another quality takeaway place and vegetarian
3. Neckarmüller: The kartoffel mit kräuterschmand (baked potato with herbed sourcream) is incredible
4. Café Im Hirsch (cute café)
5. Manufaktur (amazing pizza)
6. Ratskeller: One of my favourite evenings were the times I went here for burgers with my friends and played board games



A sunset meal at Neckarmüller

3. Life outside the university

As I have touched on before, the ability to eat out affordably in this city is a huge appeal. Meeting friends at beautiful bars and cafes all over the Altstadt is so special. Most of my nights would begin with ice cream and some beers in the Botanischer Garten before heading to a local bar.

My favourite bars:

1. Bäre: A Quintessential old German bar
2. Nimmersatt: Good alcohol, cool vibes, amazing staff
3. Ratskeller

One of the best days I spent on exchange was a scorching 30 degree day where we hired ruderboats on the neckar. Me and seven other friends all bought picnic food and a crate of beer and spent an afternoon eating, drinking, swimming and listening to music on the neckar river. It was very special and a totally unique German experience.

Exchange taught me how important friendships and personal connections are. The first couple of weeks I had made no close friends or connected with anyone on a deep level and I was struggling because I ached for that connection. A couple of weeks into exchange a friend hosted a dinner where a boy from England had just returned back to exchange. He became my best friend on exchange and if it wasn't for him and another boy called Zac my experience here

would be totally different. The conversations I had with them, the understanding we shared as people and the fun we had on nights on will stay with me for a long time.

No 1 tip for Future Exchange Students

Make a huge effort with other exchange students at the start of exchange. Try and meet as many people as possible and go along to every organised activity provided by the university. Groups form quickly on exchange and once they are formed it is much harder to penetrate them after some time has gone by. Having friends is so important on exchange so I would say this is my number one piece of advice.



Personal Conclusion

I think everyone should do an exchange. I cannot describe how invaluable the experience is to personal growth, enjoyment and creating epic memories. I always think if there is an opportunity available to you now that won't be available in the future, then you should seize it. The concept of exchange is so unique and only available to you while you are at university. You are placed in a beautiful city with a myriad of other students from all over the world and hopefully, experience one of the best times of your life.